Netwatch

BY JIM CARROLL

YOUR GUIDE TO BUSINESS & ACCOUNTING ON THE INTERNET

The simple way to stalk stock

Back in the day, I was pretty awesome at air guitar. I picked up the skill and quickly mastered it through repetitive playing of "Highway Star" by Deep Purple, my first LP record. Attending live concerts by Bachman-Turner Overdrive, April Wine and Kiss helped me become a virtuoso performer. Even as I moved into my adult years, I found a bit of guitar and a broom provide for a moment of levity. (My wife, also a CA, takes a rather dim view of my expertise in this area.)

Suffice it to say, I've been amused and intrigued by the recent massive, rapid adoption of Guitar Hero by the video gaming crowd. Suddenly, we've got guitar virtuosos all around us, and my skills are looking a little rusty.

So I made a deal with our boys: we upgrade the gaming system in the home to a Nintendo Wii in order to get the full potential of Guitar Hero. I figure this may be a video game that I can actually beat them at.

And that's when it got interesting: I discovered there is such hot demand for the Wii and related Guitar Hero games that you can't get your hands on one. A quick review of online stock at Future Shop, Best Buy and elsewhere indicated there was no inventory to be had. A call to the local Electronics Boutique provoked a laugh from the person answering the phone: "We got a shipment of six this morning and they were gone in about five minutes."

With visions of my performance opportunity going out the window, I decided it was time for action. When the shopping gets tough, the tough get sleuthing. An online search led me to a series of websites, built by uber-geeks with what must be mammoth computer skills, that track the availability of such games online in real time.

A visit to ConsoleWatch Canada, for example, shows if Amazon Canada, Best Buy, Costco, Dell or any other online vendor has a Wii, XBox 360 or PS3 in stock. Click the tab, and you'll also find out about the availability of Guitar Hero and other popular games and accessories.

I also found a discussion group on Deal Guild consisting of people looking for the same gaming devices and software. They pointed me to a Google Gadget — a bit of software code that uses the programming power of Google to run some automated Web page routines — that expanded the online inventory search to include Toys R Us Canada, Sears, HMV and The Source by Circuit City.

And so here I sit, leaving my work behind every few seconds and running a quick look at the Web page to see if any stock has arrived. On Deal Guild, someone noted that inventory suddenly became available at one store at 2 a.m. and sold out quickly. That's why you have to be fast.

I find the concept of such tools fascinating. In both these cases, someone has written some pretty fancy stuff that merely queries the online websites of various popular stores and in a matter of seconds displays that availability. It's real-time reporting for the video-game generation, and it will soon spill over to other areas of business.

Imagine online healthcare skills arbitrage, in which people access in real time the availability of ever more scarce, specialized medical skills. Or manufacturers faced with a sudden shortage of critical parts getting a code-dude with a power-tool to corral global supply. Somehow, what we are witnessing today with the gaming universe is a harbinger of a new business intensity tomorrow.

As for my air guitar future — I finally scored a Wii when one of the sites showed availability at The Source. I should be able to pick it up within a few business days, but in the meantime I'm waiting patiently, preparing to get in some great guitar licks very soon.

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INVENTORY TRACKING TOOLS

ConsoleWatch http://www.consolewatch.com

Corwin http://www.corwin.ca/wii/index.php?item=console

Google Gadget http://gmodules.com/ig/creator?synd=open&hl=en&url=http://hosting.gmodules.com/ig/gadgets/file/10228028750003439 3325/wii-search.xml